

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
Clarion Hotel, 6801 S. Tucson Blvd., Tucson AZ 85706
Saturday, January 10, 2009

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 10:04 a.m. by Chairman Yamanouchi.

Present

Advisory Commissioners

Kenneth Yamanouchi, Chairman
Linda Fulkerson, Vice Chairwoman
Gary Fredricks
Phillip Quochytewa Sr.
Bill Lunsford
Larry McKim
Terrie Gent
George Cushing

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Bob Barnes, Deputy Director
Dave Hampton, Public Information Officer
Luella Emmons, Veterans' Benefits Counselor
Cathi Star, Veterans' Benefits Counselor
James Louis, Veterans' Benefits Counselor
Gary Ochoa, Veterans' Benefits Counselor
Valerie Williams, Veterans' Benefits Counselor
Lee Borgen, Veterans' Benefits Counselor

Absent

Thomas Heaney

Guests

James Currieo, Asst. Office Manager for
Senator McCain
Manny Alvarez, AZ Senator
Congresswoman Gabrielle Gifford
David Gowan, AZ Representative
David Stevens, AZ Representative
Pat Flemming, AZ Representative
Karen Uhlich, Vice-Mayor of Tucson
Shay Saucedo for Congresswoman Gifford
Pepe Mendoza, VAMC Tucson
Kathy Mungovan, VAMC Tucson
Lorien Nelson, VAMC Tucson
Dr. Tomas Sepulveda, VAMC Tucson

Opening: Chairman Yamanouchi opened the meeting at 10:04 a.m. with appropriate ceremony.

Chairman Yamanouchi:

1. Thanked everyone for coming and recognized the distinguished guests.
2. Invited the Commissioners to introduce themselves with a brief bio.
3. Introduced Deputy Director Bob Barnes who:
 - expressed Director Strickland's regret that he was unable to attend
 - introduced Cathi Starr of the Tucson Veterans' Service Division (VSD) office and asked her to introduce the attending members of the Tucson office staff.

Minutes - The minutes of December 11, 2008 were approved as distributed. (Moved by Commissioner Fulkerson and seconded by Commissioner Gent.)

- The minutes of December 16, 2008 were approved subject to minor correction. (Moved by Commissioner McKim and seconded by Commissioner Fulkerson.)

Chairman Yamanouchi gave a brief bio on Director Strickland and gave a brief overview of the Commissions activities:

1. Unified Arizona Veterans and the Commission each sent a letter to the Governor's office strongly recommending that Director Strickland be retained as Director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS).
2. The Commission will send a letter to the new Governor requesting protection for ADVS's budget and emphasize the financial value to the State of Veteran Benefits Counselors (VBC's). Their assistance to veterans brings a very significant amount of Federal dollars into the State annually in the form of compensation, pension and education benefits. That amount will increase now that we have 45 VBC's in place throughout the State.
3. The Tucson veteran home is still a work in progress. The state has to obligate 10 million dollars and the VA will put in 20 million dollars. We need to ensure that the State's 10 million remains available.
4. Last year a Commissioner initiated a successful effort to get free tuition at Arizona's universities for the children of Arizona veterans killed in action (KIA).
5. Since "VT" has been taken off the Veterans' license plate sales have increased. The Freedom plate is also doing well. Each plate costs \$25.00 a year, \$17.00 of which is donated to the Arizona Veteran Donation Fund. The Veterans' plate and Freedom plate together bring in an average of \$60,000 dollars a month.
6. The Commission was instrumental in stopping an effort to get a "Support the Troops" license plate in Arizona. The Commission discovered that the \$17.00 donation would go to a "for profit" organization in Florida; so the Commission worked with the legislature to get the plate request disapproved.
7. The Commission and the veterans community worked hard to get proposition 200 disapproved.
8. The Mayor of Globe attended a Commission Regional meeting and spoke convincingly of the need for a VA clinic in Globe. The Commission passed his request and justification on to the VA. Globe now has a VA clinic.
9. The Commission is actively working on the issue of:
 - homeless veterans
 - women veterans
 - transportation for rural veterans to medical care
 - state income tax exemption beyond the current \$2,500.00 from military retired pay
 - health care for retired military and veterans

Comments and Questions

Chairman Yamanouchi turned the meeting over to Commissioners McKim and Gent.

Comment: Leo Pimple of AMVETS Chapter 89 gave an update on carillon project for the Southern Arizona Veteran Cemetery. The dedication is set for Memorial Day 2010.

Question: Are plans being made to cope with all the returning troops.

Answer: Congressman Gifford responded:

1. Efforts already in place and will continue under the new administration.
2. First Lady Laura Bush has taken on the issue of military families in distress.
3. The new GI Bill will help many veterans and families, and they now have 15 years to use it.
4. She will continue to push for increased funding for veteran's health care.

Question: What about a state veterans' cemetery?

Answer: Deputy Director Barnes advised:

1. There are no plans in process at this time. One reason is that there is a philosophy against locating a State or Federal veteran cemetery inside the 75 mile radius of an existing State or Federal cemetery. Tucson is too close to Sierra Vista.
2. It will be put on the list of things to work on.

Comment: A veteran praised the veteran program at University of Arizona. He is very impressed with the excellent level of support given to more than 300 veterans and noted that the University has plans to expand their program.

Question: What is the progress of getting a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) center in Tucson?

Answer:

1. Palo Alto VA Medical Center (VAMC) is the primary TBI center for the southwestern US. VAMC Tucson has been designated as a TBI center and currently has over 200 troops in treatment.
2. Chairman Yamanouchi noted that soldiers now wear protective vests. The result of which is that the number of limb amputations has more than doubled. Most of the killed in action die from head wounds.

Question: Why don't we have more mental health counselors in the Sierra Vista clinic?

Answer:

1. There is one counselor in Sierra Vista.
2. There is funding for two more counselors but the VA has been unable to find counselors to work there.
3. Anyone who knows a counselor looking for work, tell them that Sierra Vista is hiring.

Question: When a veterans' advocate resigns why aren't the affected clients notified?

Answer: Deputy Director Barnes asked the veteran to see him after the meeting to discuss the particulars of his situation.

Comment: Iraq/Afghan vets are coming back with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury and major depression; but not seeking or getting help. More needs to be done to reach out to them. Vets talking to vets works.

Response:

1. VAMC Tucson has teams that goes out into the community, homeless shelters, soup kitchens and the streets looking for veterans to get them hooked up with services.
2. VAMC Tucson teams work very closely with service organizations and other helping entities to locate and assist veterans.
3. There are 2 stand downs a year in Tucson to reach out and help homeless/at risk veterans.

Comment: Veteran is Viet Nam blue water sailor with PTSD. He expressed great praise for the treatment he has received from the VA. It helped improve his quality of life.

Question: Is the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment office in Sierra Vista going to reopen.

Answer:

1. There are no plans to reopen the office because the population does not justify it.
2. Sierra Vista can be appropriately served by the Tucson office.

Question: Why can't we get in-state tuition for all veterans using the GI bill?

Answer: Currently work is being done to get in-state tuition for honorably discharged veterans.

Question: Why can't we get real estate and vehicle property tax relief for veterans who are less than 100% disabled?

Answer: Commissioner Fulkerson advised:

1. Giving property tax relief equal to the percent of service connected disability was one of the proposals put forward by the Veterans' Research Council last year. A 10% service connected vet would get a 10% reduction; 20% service connected vet would get a 20% reduction etc. up to 100% service connected paying no property tax.

Chairman Yamanouchi asked State Senator Manny Alvarez to look into this issue.

2. Governor Napolitano was in favor of the principle and indicated that she would consider it when the state's financial picture improved.
3. Vehicle property tax exemption increase was requested, but no action has been taken so far.
4. Veterans that are 100% based on Individual Unemployability (IU) need to get a letter from the VA Regional Office (VARO). They need to specify that the letter not mention IU. It depends on who you are talking to whether they will just say you are 100%.

Question: Vet wants to know where he can *gain access to obtain* a paper copy of Title 38 United States Code, *such as in a VA facility library*.

Answer: Legislative offices have a copy. Talk to a senator or representative.

Commissioner Gent asked Pepe Mendoza from VAMC Tucson to look into this.

Comment: Property tax exemption for non-profit organizations is granted or declined at the County level. There is a need for legislation to standardize the policy state wide.

Response: Chairman Yamanouchi recommended that people contact their legislators.

Comment: Arizona needs a Secretary of Veterans' Affairs on the Governor's staff.

Response: Deputy Director Barnes advised:

1. The Director of ADVS is a cabinet level position.
2. Director Strickland holds that position on the Governor's staff for Arizona.

Question: When will category 8 reopen?

Answer: Category 8 will open for some vets in June this year based on their 2008 income.

Question: Vet is close to 65 years old. Does he need to take Medicare B if he is using the VA medical system for all his care?

Answer: That is a personal decision but Medicare B pays when the VA is not available to handle the situation. The VA rarely pays for private sector care.

Question: Why aren't there more doctors available at VA facilities; it takes months to get an appointment.

Answer:

1. It is a recruiting problem.
2. There is a critical shortage in most medical fields.
3. Based on population, Arizona is 26% below the nationwide level for the number of primary care providers.

Question: Vet filed an appeal in January 2008 and has not received a response. Is this normal?

Answer: Vet was encouraged to get with one of the VBC's after the meeting for specific assistance.

Question: Why is the personal property vehicle tax exemption for 100% veterans limited to only one vehicle?

Answer: State law stipulates that the exemption applies to only one vehicle and now that exemption extends to the surviving spouse after the veteran's death.

Question: From a disabled woman veteran: How can a veteran get a complete personal breakdown of her disability compensation, how much is compensation, how much is dependents allowance. The veteran has had significant problems with the dependence allowance for adult children in school.

Response: Deputy Director Barnes asked the veteran to get with him after the meeting to get more specific information.

Comment: Veteran has made multiple calls to various VBC's and organizations trying to get help and can not get help from anyone.

Response: Chairman Yamanouchi acknowledged that it can be difficult to get hold of some people some of the time, but people with problems need to be persistent and they certainly should take advantage of the people in attendance who are ready and willing to be of assistance to them on an individual basis.

Question: Why does it take over 2 hours to get through to the VA on the phone?

Answer:

1. The volume of people seeking help keeps increasing and the phone system can only handle so much at any one time. VAMC Tucson is working on getting funding to update their phone system again.
2. There are cards available on the handout table that provide direct phone numbers for specific offices. The problem and people's frustration is recognized and the VA is working hard to keep up with the demand.
3. The veteran was invited to get with one of the VAMC staff members after the meeting.
4. VAMC and VARO are two entirely separate from each other. The medical system can not help people with disability claims questions. Their only involvement with disability claims is to perform rating exams.
5. VAMC Tucson experienced 558,815 outpatient visits last year and close to 10,000 inpatient nights.

Comment: Vet would like to see Arizona implement the yellow ribbon program at universities.

Comment: Commissioner Fredricks observed that there are many common problems. A purpose of the regional meetings is to:

1. get people to attend and express their problems
2. have people available on site to address individual problems
3. provide and share information (the answers to many questions come from other attendees)
4. there are a great many resources available that people are not aware of

Chairman Yamanouchi:

1. thanked everyone for coming
2. assured the audience that their frustrations are understood
3. issues raised have been recorded and will be carefully reviewed during our February meeting in Phoenix.
4. advised he would entertain a motion to adjourn

Adjournment: Commissioner McKim moved to adjourn, seconded by Commissioner Cushing. Motion approved at 12:00 p.m. The next regular meeting will be held at 10 a.m. on February 12, 2009 at the State Veteran Home, 4141 N. 3rd Street, Phoenix AZ 85012.

Submitted by
Lee Borgen
Secretary